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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001621

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: HARASSED AUTHOR STILL WRITING...BUT  
FOR WHOM?

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. Award-winning Turkmen author Rakhim Esenov continues to write, although there is little chance that his latest literary works, based on the lives of Soviet Turkmen heros, will be published any time soon. He continues to suffer from government harassment, such as telephone monitoring, airport searches and residence checks. He sees little difference between policies under Niyazov and Berdimuhamedov, which have produced a generation of ill-educated university graduates that he described as "zombies." Despite the difficulties, he has a sense of mission about his efforts to inform the present and future generations of Turkmen about their country's past. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On December 15, poloff met with writer Rakhim Esenov to discuss the Turkmen government's suppression of his work, as well as the general lack of freedom of expression in the country. The 81-year old writer, who received a Freedom to Write award from the PEN American Center in 2006, continues to write every day, commenting that "one cannot stop working." He has completed his memoirs, as well as a historical novel about Nedirbay Aytakov, the first chairman of Soviet Turkmenistan's Central Committee. He is currently working on a book about Gaygysyz Atabayev, the most famous Soviet Turkmen revolutionary, considered during the Soviet era to be the founder of the Turkmen republic. Both of these figures were killed during Stalin's purges, but later rehabilitated by Soviet authorities, only to again be "erased" by Niyazov. About his book the "Crowned Wanderer," which was banned under Niyazov because it accurately described the historical Turkmen figure Bayram Khan as a Shia Muslim, instead of a Sunni as Niyazov insisted, Esenov said Bayram Khan's religion was a historical fact, which could not be changed.

13. (C) Concerning his personal circumstances, Esenov noted that the government continues to persecute him, monitoring his telephone and reading his mail. His daughter, who acted vigorously on his behalf during his 2004 arrest, making the rounds of international organizations and embassies to enlist their support, receives bi-monthly visits from "municipal officials" checking on her continued residence. During one

such visit, the officials admitted to her husband that they worked for the security ministry. Esenov himself receives such "routine" visits, although he said none of his neighbors do. He also complained that, when he returns from annual trips to Moscow for medical treatment, officials at the airport search him "from head to toe" and go through his belongings. Esenov said he travels to Moscow for medical treatment because he was afraid if he sought medical treatment in Ashgabat, he might become a victim of foul play.

The most recent airport incident was on September 13, when officials seized copies of four of his Soviet-era historical novels that had recently been republished by Moscow publishers. He carried with him a total of ten books, three sets of a trilogy and one copy of a separate novel. After 50 days, only two sets of the trilogy were returned to him. Esenov said someone in the government, probably in the security ministry, "stole" the remaining volumes. He felt that all of this persecution was meant to provoke him.

14. (C) Esenov acknowledged that there was no chance for his works to be published currently in Turkmenistan. Turkmen officials are "very far from that." He compared the officials responsible for evaluating cultural works with dockworkers being asked to evaluate perfumes. The problem goes back to the Niyazov era, when the former president said that he "did not need people smarter than himself," and that it was "hard to work with smart people." As a result, the respected, professional, scholarly officials left the government, either to work in private business or to leave the country. Esenov pointed out that the same person who was in charge of censorship in Soviet Turkmenistan, Kakabay

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Atayev, still holds the position of Chairman of the Committee for Keeping State Secrets. Despite the demise of Niyazov and rise of Berdimuhamedov, "nothing changed." Esenov acknowledged that some reasonable changes involving pensions, ten-year school curriculum, and internal movement were introduced by Berdimuhamedov. However, Esenov did not consider these to be genuine reforms, but rather simply rational actions that had to be carried out, "as obvious as eating breakfast in the morning." As for the future of Turkmen literature, Esenov stated that none of the current Turkmen writers can produce such books such as he and other Soviet-era writers wrote. The impact of university education under Niyazov -- two years of course work and two years of practical work -- created a generation of "zombies," and now they are coming to power.

15. (C) COMMENT: Clearly a product of his time, Esenov bemoaned the degradation of education and manipulation of history that has taken place in post-Soviet Turkmenistan. His current writing projects about Soviet Turkmen revolutionary heroes, historical figures that were anathema under Niyazov, have little chance of being published under the current regime. Still, Esenov carries on, convinced of the importance of documenting a history that is completely unknown to the generation of Turkmen coming of age after independence. Unlike his Soviet era works, which apparently still have a readership in Russia, it's unclear who will ever have an opportunity to read these latest works. END COMMENT.  
CURRAN